



Anyone's best friend: A qualitative exploration of the positive influences of animal assisted therapy on mental health and well-being

Stephanie Wood

Supervised by: Julia Robinson

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ABSTRACT

Animal assisted therapy is becoming a widely used alternative psychotherapy. Research has shown animals to have positive influences on the physical, emotional, social and psychological aspects of the human psyche. This study explored the positive influences animal assisted therapies had on mental health and psychological well-being. In this study, animal assisted therapy acted as an umbrella term for the variations of animals used such as equine assisted therapy and therapy dogs. Participants were registered counsellors who utilised the therapy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, focusing on participants' observations and experiences using animal assisted therapies with their clients. Thematic analysis produced four themes; *Connection, Present Moment, Personal Growth and Freedom & Flexibility*. Despite this study providing support for the effectiveness of animal assisted therapy, further research is needed to propel this alternative method forward. Animal assisted therapy has proven flexible enough to be embedded into current and widely used therapy techniques such as Cognitive Behavioural therapy. The popularity and successes of animal assisted therapies in the United States suggests that more attention needed to increase the work which has started here in the UK.

KEY WORDS:	ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY	WELL-BEING	MENTAL HEALTH	THERAPY	ANIMALS
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Introduction

The aim of the following study was to explore how animal assisted therapies and interventions create a positive effect on a person's mental health and well-being. Through the experiences of practitioners and counsellors who utilise animal assisted therapy, research explored the advantages of animal-assisted therapy as an alternative method of psychotherapy. Previous qualitative research and therapeutic models suggested that a human-animal bond could enhance and redevelop dimensions of a person's life. Participants' included psychology and or counselling practitioners who specialised in using animal assisted therapies. For this research in particular, animal assisted therapy acted as an umbrella term for the different variations of animals used, such as equine assisted therapy and therapy dogs. The following study focuses on exploring mental health and well-being through the dimensions of; physical, emotional, social and psychological.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the existential perspective of psychotherapy in conjunction with the biophilia hypothesis. The existential approach focuses on the human condition holistically, using philosophical perspectives to explore individual human difficulties. The role of existential practitioners is to work alongside clients to help them understand and elaborate on their own perspectives in life. This is done by focusing on the clients' present life and using retrospection to understand their past life. Existential psychotherapy focuses on four levels of experience and existence that confront individuals, and it is these levels that shapes an individuals' overall well-being. The physical realm, similar to Maslows' (1943) first hierarchical level of needs, focuses on bodily needs such as desire, relief and sleep whilst birth and death are also included. The social realm, in which lies everything to do with relationships, culture, society and emotions. The personal realm which is concerned with issues of the self, including identity, personal strengths and weaknesses and the overall sense of self. The final realm, the making realm, is the dimension where we make sense of our lives and is considered the realm of transcendence. A core belief in existential counselling is that despite human beings feeling essentially alone in the world, we long to be connected with others (Bartz, 2009; Churchill & Reynolds, 2013; Koole, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 2006; Mangrum, 2015; Pattison, 2005).

This is where the biophilia hypothesis is introduced. The biophilia hypothesis focuses on the idea that human beings possess an innate tendency to seek connection with nature and other forms of life (Beery, Jonsson & Elmberg, 2015; Clowney, 2013; Fromm, 1973; Gunderson, 2014; Kellert & Wilson, 1993). The term was first used by Wilson (1984), whom argued that humanity has as innate affinity for the natural world which affects our physical, psychological and spiritual states. Wilson (1984) stressed that a focus on life and lifelike processes are an integral part of the development of humans, as an individual and a species. Similar to the concept of human well-being being constructed of different levels, the structure of the background literature was

based on the research from the Judith Trust charity. This charity focuses on physical, emotional, social and psychological issues that affect mental health and well-being.

Research claims animal assisted therapy provides a wide range of human health benefits from reducing anxiety (Rhoades, Winetrobe & Rice, 2015) to the improvement of mobility (Tan, 2013), which would ultimately lead to good mental well-being. Animal assisted therapy is defined as an animal-assisted intervention involving a patient, therapist, handler and animal, whose goals are to facilitate the patients' success in an effective therapy.

Physical research

Longitudinal research (Lucas, 2007) reported that negative effects on well-being and mental health were likely to coincide with physical impairments or disabilities. Animals have been used through history to facilitate patients' recuperation or simply provide an air of calmness. Interaction with animals can produce a calming effect which has shown to reduce blood pressure, heart and respiratory rate and other health effecting challenges (Cole & Gawlinksi, 2000; Wilson & Turner, 1998). Research claims that animal assisted therapies reduce pain levels prior to exposure of pain producing stimuli. Studies show that exposure to friendly pets or animals causes a release of endorphins and lymphocytes into the blood stream which increases the body's immune system response (Anderson et al., 1992; Vormbrock & Grossberg, 1988). Braun et al., (2009) found pain reduction to be four times greater in children who underwent animal assisted therapy as opposed to a control group. This type of reduction response was found comparable to paracetamol and codeine tablets for adults, thus emphasising the strength of animal assisted therapy. The therapy has shown to be effective in severe cases of physical incapability such as immobility. Tan (2013) found that after a year of weekly exercises throwing balls for dogs, patient David regained full use of his arm which he lost due to suffering from a stroke. Tan (2013) went on to emphasise the flexibility of animal assisted therapy to be used in place of traditional physiotherapy which is not always successful or desirable to patients.

Emotional Research

A consequence of mental health issues such as depression, is that patients' emotions and behaviour become irregular and sometimes even destructive (Smith & Schmitz, 2014). Another consequence of depression is a diminished sense of motivation and action (Smith, 2013). Milyavskaya & Koestner (2011) demonstrated a strong link between satisfying needs, motivation and a healthy well-being. Milyavskaya & Koestner's (2011) study suggests similarities to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) claimed that humans are unable to self-actualise (be happy in life with a healthy mental state and good quality of life) if they do not meet certain needs. Unable to meet the requirements to move up the hierarchy produces lack of motivation which stunts a human's process to achieve a quality of life, healthy mind and well-being.

Research into recovery and rehabilitation suggest that animals provide and facilitate motivation. This is done through interactive activities such as grooming, caring for, playing with and feeding which also helped reduce anxiety levels, allowing emotions to stabilise (Barba, 1995).

Social Research

Farm-based services have begun to utilise animal assisted therapy (Pederson, Ihlebaek & Kirkevold, 2012). These services aim to assist people with mental disorders by developing skills needed to become independent in the community. The farm environment was viewed as a positive real life setting by mental health professionals and an important benefit in enhancing social skills for those with mental health issues (Berget et al., 2008). Furthermore, Iancu et al., (2014) emphasised employment opportunities as an important factor in rehabilitation thus creating vocational services for participants. Farm-based services helped patients improve social skills and provided a community environment for patients to develop their communication skills as social stigmas around mental health sometimes made socialisation a difficult aspect in peoples' lives.

Research looking at Aphasia, a speech and language disorder, found that the presence of therapy dogs stimulated social verbal and non-verbal communication (LaFrance et al., 2007). Similar studies investigating animal assisted therapy and its influence of the development of communication skills produced favourable results (Messent, 1983; Guttmann et al., 1983).

Psychological Research

Animal assisted therapy is arguably seen most effective in psychological studies (Katcher & Wilkins, 1993). A large section of animal assisted therapy research is applied among cases of Autism Spectrum Disorder in children. Autistic children show an improvement in focusing attention, social interaction, positive emotion and producing speech (Martin & Farnum, 2002). Farm-based services again provide strong support in the positive influence animal-assisted therapy has on suffers of depression, schizophrenia and other severe mental disorders (Iancu et al., 2014; Pederson et al., 2012). Self-esteem and self-worth levels noticeably increased among participants in addition to providing a sense of appreciation and belonging. Research has provided strong evidence supporting the power of animal assisted therapy as an alternative method to alleviate difficulties in life, in particular, physical, emotional, social and psychological disabilities. As research has suggested, mental health and well-being can deteriorate as a result of such difficulties.

Research Question

A thematic analysis was conducted in order to explore the influences of animal assisted therapy had on mental health and well-being, in psychotherapy. The

following research was interested in the physical, emotional, social and psychological dimensions of human beings and how through working with animals provided positive therapeutic techniques and enhanced positive mental health and well-being of humans. The data collected provides further research and support for the growing portfolio of animal assisted methods psychotherapy.

Methodology

In depth, one on one interviews were used in order to produce detailed qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews were identified as an appropriate style of method, allowing in-depth responses to be made whilst providing the possibility to gain further data from participants. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions in order to deter away from leading questions and researcher bias. Seale (2004) supported the use of open ended questions as a method of veering away from leading questions or probes. Earlier studies praised the quality of semi-structured interviews for the capability of gathering detailed data (Bryman, 2004; Kvale, 1996; & Silverman, 2005).

The interviews were recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Smith & Osborn (2008) proposed semi-structured interviews to be most effective with thematic analysis due to the added emphasis on the importance of participant experiences. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes to 1 hour and transcriptions were produced in the recommended style of Ashmore & Reed (2000). For a sample of the annotated transcripts please see appendices.

The analysis focussed on an interpretivist concept using thematic analysis at a sematic level (Raddon, 2010). This was the employed method of analysis in order to identify themes across the data (King & Horrocks, 2010; Ritchie et al., 2013). This form of analysis has become a regularly used analysis method for qualitative research due to the freedom of expression and flexibility in moulding the analysis to a researchers' work (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith & Dunworth, 2003). Analysis of the data was centred on the participants' observations and experiences providing and working with animal assisted therapy. The insider perspective has been argued by many as the most vital benefit through using thematic analysis, along with providing a structure for new themes and future research to be introduced (Boyatzis, 1998; Davis & Goffman, 1975). Furthermore, the freedom of detail development created through thematic analysis provides depth of understanding, focusing on understanding the participants' experiences rather than defining behaviour into a broad generalisation.

Participants consisted of professionals from across the UK whom had or still specialised in animal assisted therapy, equine assisted psychotherapy and or animal assisted learning. The inclusion criterion for the study required participants to have provided a therapeutic service using animals. Participants' were presented with

invitation letters and after accepting to take part, provided with consent forms and participant information sheets. These were sent out in order to gain formal consent from the participants and information on what the study consisted of. Following the interviews, participants verbally debriefed and given a physical copy of a debrief sheet.

Ethical approval was obtained through the British Psychological Society and the following study will be conducted in line with the BPS code of practice. Informed Consent, anonymity, protection of participants, right to withdraw and duty of care were ethical guidelines that the study enforced. Participants were sent invitation letters or emails inviting them to take part in the study and explaining why they had been invited to take part. Consent forms were then sent out to gain formal consent from the participants and participant information sheets providing further details were issued. After the interviews had taken place, the participants were verbally debriefed as well as being handed a physical copy of a debrief sheet. Any questions were asked and they were reminded of their right to withdraw. Details of the researcher and their supervisor were provided in case of future questions and queries.

Analysis & Discussion

The analysis from the interview transcripts produced four main themes, i) Connection, ii) Present Moment, iii) Personal Growth and iv) Freedom and Flexibility.

Connection

The theme of *Connection* focussed on the spiritual side of understanding oneself and how the self can have an impact on others. Two sub-themes were identified through Connection; ‘understanding energies’ and ‘social interactions’.

Table 1. Connection

Dominant Theme	Sub-themes
Connection	A: Understanding Energies B: Social Interactions
Supporting Quotes	
A: “A horse comes to a situation in a completely neutral way and is going to pick up on your energy and react from an energetic place.” “‘She acts a different dog with different people...the way that she is with people [clients] is very individual to them.” B: “after the 10 weeks they definitely interacted in a much less aggressive [way]...some even moving to a position where they were happy to help teach another child.”	

Understanding energies

Participants stressed the importance in the power of an animals' capability to sense energies and moods of clients, which in turn influences the animals' behaviour towards the clients.

Sanders (2003) and Wipper (2000) emphasised how the human-animal relationship can be established through communicating feelings and intentions just from the presence of the human and from the first touch of the animal. A common concept in mental health literature is that individuals are profoundly capable of unconsciously projecting expectations, feelings, needs etc. (Moore & Cross, 2014; Norman & Rylie, 2013). Research (Sanders, 2003; Whiten & van Schaik, 2007) has confirmed vast levels of intelligence among a range of species of animals, highlighting their evolved emotional, cognitive and social intelligence capabilities. Therefore, it is extremely likely that individuals' moods, expectations, thoughts etc. can equally be projected onto animal species as they can between the human species. The analyses from the interviews promotes the notion that animals, in particular horses, are sensitive and receptive to energies and emotions, but that they are also capable to demonstrate how effective the clients' mood is whether it's negative or positive. As quoted from a participant; *"if they [the client] disconnect, the horse disconnects and walks off, so they can see how they have an impact."* Working with the horse provides the opportunity for clients to focus on their thoughts and their energy.

This concept of a self-energy is comparable to the emphasis of spirituality wellness in the division of Transpersonal Psychology. There have many attempts to define spiritual wellness. The general consensus is that it is an innate concept or level of the psyche. When individuals reach this level, their personalities evolve to appreciate greater senses of authenticity and beauty, an awareness of self-identity, positive self-concept, and finally a more holistic perspective of the world (Assagiolo, 1965; Chandler, Holden & Kolander, 1992; Maslow, 1971; Ring, 1984; Wilbur, Engler & Brown, 1986).

Spirituality is becoming increasingly recognised as an essential component of well-being with literature supporting a positive relationship between mindfulness (a similar philosophical notion stressing the importance of present awareness and understanding of the self) and self-well-being (Crockett & Prosek, 2013; Xu et al., 2014). Equine assisted psychotherapy provides clients with the opportunity to focus on understanding their energy and mood which in turn will influence their behaviour which clients can then transfer onto their social interactions and social bonding. This introduces the second sub-theme of 'social interactions.'

Social interactions

Equine assisted interventions and psychotherapies were noted for their ability to enhance clients' abilities in social situations and interactions among others.

Research emphasises the importance of peer relations in providing learning opportunities for social skills, well-being and future well-being of children in particular (Erdley, Nangle, Newman & Carpenter, 2001; Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Thomson,

2009; Sullivan, 1953). Similar to humans, animals such as dogs and horses are social species, therefore social acceptance, social interactions, feelings and behaviours are equally as valuable (Walsh, 2009).

The analyses highlight the benefits equine assisted therapies have on young school children. At that stage in life, healthy development is not only vital but also vulnerable to societal pressures and negative experiences. Interactions with animals provide further opportunities for children to develop life skills in addition to helping them understand and overcome issues that are already prevalent in their lives. Melson (2003) presents human animal interactions in combination with child development theories, emphasising the capabilities animals have in stimulating cognitive growth and how animals can act as catalysts for social engagements and cohesiveness (Esposito, McCune, Griffin & Maholmes, 2011).

Present Moment

Present Moment centred around focussing on the internal self in the immediate external environment. Two sub-themes were identified through Present Moment; 'being in the now' and 'feeling calm.'

Table 2. Present Moment

Dominant Theme	Sub-themes
Present Moment	A: Being in the Now B: Feeling Calm
Supporting Quotes	
<p>A: "People...tend to be really anxious because they're worrying about the past or the future, and in order to build a relationship with the horses they have to learn to be in the present moment which is a really good transferable skill."</p> <p>"When they... have experienced it...it changes them in that moment...they have started the process of instead of talking about starting the process."</p> <p>B: "The biggest thing that people have said and that I have observed is being calm...people have felt calmer..."</p>	

Being in the Now

The concept of mentally focusing on the moment and living in the now was an occurring theme through analysis. This was identified as a vital mind state in order for clients to live mentally healthy and happily. The participants stressed that in order for their clients to attend successfully to their lives and issues they may face; they must first begin to value the present moment. Participant's stressed that humans are likely to waste mental and physical energy lingering on the past or worrying about the future. In order for their clients to attend to their personal issues in a healthy way, they must begin to listen and understand their own thoughts and energies, as these can manifest into certain behaviours that affect those around them. This cannot be

done without full mental participation from the client otherwise the animals they are working with will not respond with the desired behaviour. Throughout the interviews it became clear that the concept of 'being in the now' integrated within the early theme of connection and understanding energies.

As mentioned in the previous section, literature supports positive relationship between mindfulness and self-well-being. Brown & Ryan (2003) describes mindfulness as an attribute of consciousness, being mentally present, which promotes well-being. It is a state of attentiveness to the surroundings, feelings, emotions and environment of the client at that time. Research indicates that the way in which individuals' process information and utilise their cognitive skills, can then influence their manifestations of positive or negative outlooks on life and even influence how they experience psychological distresses such as depression or anxiety (Fortunato & Furey, 2011; Ryff & Singer, 2003). Despite mindfulness and spiritual well-being belonging to a small branch of Transpersonal Psychology, the importance of observance is discussed through many larger branches of the science. Psychoanalysts use methods of 'free association' to explore the psychological representatives of a clients' attentive comparisons (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), whereas cognitive theorists focus on the power of attention when clients are gathering and processing objective or subjective experiences (Pain & Central Nervous System Week, 2014).

Despite a large emphasis on being in the moment, the data also presented the concept of working with animals as a distraction for the client. Professionals may highlight the contradiction in animal assisted therapies being able to enhance the clients' ability of 'being in the moment,' along with the introduction of an animal providing a distraction for the client. However, Barth's (1997) discussion on evaluating daydreams can be applied to the definition of the type of distraction therapy assistance animals are to the clients. Daydreams are common ways of distraction from everyday tasks, which involve unconscious forms of symbolism. Barth (1997) stressed encouragement in exploring such internal experiences in order to fulfil life in the external world. In relation to the distraction of working with an animal, instead of the client being preoccupied with internal processes such as anxiety or paranoia, they are interacting with the animal. The distraction of an animal provided an outlet for clients to focus their internal processes which then aided in shaping their behaviour. Research argues that distraction is a common advantage of interaction with animals, that allows anxiety levels to lower and emotions to stabilise (Barba, 1995; Hynes, 2005; Katcher, Friedmann, Beck & Lynch, 1983).

Farm-based interventions concluded that participants reported being involved with helping out in the farm provided a sense of normality to their lives and a total distraction from their mental health issues.

Working with an animal proved an effective alternative method especially for children and young people whom had previously struggled with or would struggle in clinical one on one therapy sessions. The data reported that whether the animal was referred to as an external object or another therapist, clients would focus on the animals' behaviours and feelings as opposed to their own. This would then act as a

window of opportunity for the client to compare their thoughts and behaviours with the therapy animal. Through understanding the animal, clients would consciously project it onto their own situation.

As the client learns to become aware and attentive to their feelings and emotions, it creates a self-endorsed behavioural change which is associated to successful mindfulness and enhanced well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2014, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Furthermore, feeling calmer or less stressed allows the client to focus on themselves and the present moment. This leads us onto the second sub-theme of 'feeling calm'.

Feeling Calm

Participants praised the calming influence animal assisted therapy had on their clients. They argued that the strength in reducing focus on the past or future and instead appreciating the immediate present environment with the animal, thus created calming effects on their clients. Research presents that even just the simple presence of non-human animals such as fish in an aquarium in waiting rooms facilitates calmness in people (Katcher et al., 1983; Lawrence, 1993). Equine assisted psychotherapy takes place in almost identical settings to farm-based services that have also been established as an alternative therapy. Such farm-based interventions provide further support for the positive influences animals have on people, and provide strong results in helping sufferers of mental disorders such as depression and schizophrenia, (Iancu et al., 2014; Pederson et al., 2012). Feedback from these farm-based services provided similarities in the feedback participants received from their clients in that the process and environment was as a stress release, in addition to providing a sense of appreciation and belonging to the world around them.

There is an abundance of literature in how animals reduce stress levels, regulate emotions as well reduce anxiety and other risks to human well-being. Furthermore, animal assisted therapies are arguably seen most effective in psychological cases creating positive effects on a patients' mental health and well-being (Katcher & Wilkins, 1993).

Personal Growth

Personal Growth describes the inner processes that participants noted were the most prevalent in their clients' development during their animal assisted therapies. Two sub-themes were identified in Personal Growth: 'confidence' and 'communication.'

Table 3. Personal Growth

Dominant Theme	Sub-themes
Personal Growth	A: Confidence B: Communication

Supporting Quotes
<p>A: "... [some children] really are not very confident in their ability in the classroom so I have offered them the opportunity to read to Aurora [the therapy dog] ...I've had feedback from the teacher saying that it has naturally increased their confidence and that they're prepared to read in class</p> <p>"Training a dog to do something can be really empowering, you can work on your assertiveness or confidence skills or boundary issues..."</p> <p>B: "...also facilitates building up communication...some children are a bit locked up with their communication and the younger ones more obviously find it more difficult to talk about their feelings..."</p>

Confidence

Participants' praised the confidence building skills that working with animals created. Tasks such as leading the horses or performing tricks with the therapy dog required a mutual partnership between human and animal. The gained mutual respect between therapy animal and client was described as empowering, with participants recognising personality changes in their clients as therapy sessions developed. Through interaction with the therapy animals, session by session clients began to trust their own intuition more and enhance leadership skills, motivation and confidence. Participants stressed that many clients' cases were lacking in confidence. Clients lacking in confidence tend to report low levels of self-efficacy and motivation which are vital aspects in reaching self-actualisation, an optimal level of growth, development and thus a healthy mental state and well-being (Cohen & Cairns, 2011; Hanton, Mellalieu & Hall, 2004; Luszczynka, Scholz & Schwarzer, 2005; Maslow; 1971).

Maslow (1971) stressed that self-actualisation could only be reached through an individuals' desire to reach the next developmental level. This process is reliant to the individual displaying confidence in their own ability to achieve these goals, and the desire for personal growth. Recent research from Kogstad, Ekeland & Hummelvoll (2011), incorporated Maslow's (1971) emphasis on personal growth in their definition of recovery. According to Kogstad et al., (2011), recovery is a fundamentally personal process that involves patients finding and believing in a new sense of self. Once a new self-orientation is introduced patients then had the confidence to confront issues which they would have originally been overcome by and in turn has an impact on their mental health and well-being. Confidence is a multifaceted concept for people. A common theme in individuals living with mental and or physical adversities is struggling to understand and communicate across their thoughts and feelings.

Communication

Analysis from the interviews uncovered animal assisted therapies to have dual positive communication influences revolving around inner self communication and enhanced social communications. Research praises interacting with animals for the

encouragement it provides in people communicating across their emotions without fear of rejection. Although receptive language ability of some animals is unknown, research shows that animals are capable of understanding some human communication and energies (Barba, 1995; LaFrance, Garcia & LeBreche, 2007). Dogs are believed to be empathic listeners whom Bardill & Hutchinson (1997) praised for their ability to bring comfort for isolated teenagers in psychiatric units. Furthermore, the teenagers enhanced their verbal communication skills by practicing what they would say to the psychologist with the dog who took the place of an active listener. The teenagers of Bardill & Hutchinson's (1997) study came from a background where they lacked the role of an active listener and were rejected, criticised or punished for talking to others, especially adults. The inability to trust or speak to adults was also an occurrence in some of the clients of the participants in this current study who also praised the empathic listening skills of therapy dogs. In addition to belong an active listener, therapy dogs have shown to act as social catalysts (Bardill & Hutchinson, 1997; Corson & Corson, 1980; Kongable et al., 1989; LaFrance et al., 2007). The presence of a dog provides encouragement for both young and old, with feedback from care homes reporting an increase in positive communicative variables such as smiles, laughs and verbalisations specifically in the older age group. Participants of this recent study similarly reported an increase in communication between therapist and client, even when the animal was not yet in sight or involved.

Freedom and Flexibility

The final theme of *Freedom and Flexibility* discusses the interpretive advantages and holistic approach of animal assisted therapy. Two sub-themes became evident: 'metaphor' and a 'less clinical environment.'

Table 4. Freedom & Flexibility

Dominant Theme	Sub-themes
Freedom & Flexibility	A: Metaphor B: Less clinical environment
Supporting Quotes	
<p>A: "...we can focus on the underlying problems and start using the obstacles as metaphors to help them and again that can be quite proactive because...when you're working with a metaphor and getting the dog to jump over something which is a big part of your depression it does cause a big directional shift in the therapy work."</p> <p>B: "...clients who've received difficult treatment at the hands of their fellow human beings it takes a long time for them to trust people again..."</p>	

“People that I have worked with are people that don’t like therapy or...found it too cognitive, soon as they’re in the field with the horse they’ll start talking about all sorts because it doesn’t feel like a therapy session.”

Metaphor

Participants’ regularly referred to their clients’ experiences with therapy animals as a type of personal metaphor. Tasks such as leading the animal through obstacle courses proved a popular and successful way for their clients to visualise and understand what is causing their ill health. Psychoanalytic literature defines the ‘metaphorical process’ a three-part process in which the aim of the unconscious creative is to satisfy logical and/or psychological needs (Buchholtz, Spiekermann & Kachele, 2015; Enckell, 2010; Fiumara, 1995; Kirshner, 2014). Translational metaphors in Freuds’ (1900) ‘Interpretation of Dreams,’ suggests the patient can be seen as an active healer by acquiring a new psychic territory through the elaboration of their metaphors. In the current study, clients’ successes in using tasks with animals as a metaphor, created proactive attitudes and motivation towards treating their ill health, reminiscent of Freuds’ (1900) teachings.

As mentioned before, a metaphor is a multi-level entity, consisting of the primary linguistic level and the secondary semantic level (Beardsley, 1958; Buchholtz et al., 2015; Ricoeur, 1976). The semantic level is where the participants’ clients are able to create a possible human reality (i.e. developing healthy mental health and well-being). Enckell (2010) argued that the clients “metaphor is thus the domain in which novel experiential possibilities may be created...it is a model for the creation of meaning as well as for the reality of possibilities.” The client centered design that animal assisted therapies use has shown the use of metaphors to be a vital tool in explaining and understanding complex mental processes related to mental health and well-being. Qualitative concepts of investigation such as client centered therapy, animal assisted therapy and experiential psychology require more holistic frameworks and environments.

Less clinical environment

The current analyses highlighted that working with animals provided a clinical bridge between participants’ and their clients. Clients whom had previously struggled with pressurised therapies such as one on one cognitive behavioural therapy, or who simply struggled to open up, found a comfort in the presence of a therapy animal. Participants observed that animal assisted therapy was not as demanding as other therapies and yet just as effective. A recent study from Patten (2015) stressed the different examples in thinking about depression. It was argued that the aetiology is still to be fully understood as several possible models could be identified as causes of depression. Patten (2015) concluded that parallels to an overall concept of the cause of depression could be destructive due to the many possibilities of causes, therefore treatments and recovery should not be generalised for patients. Patten’s (2015) research mimics participants’ feedback that talk therapy and cognitive

behavioural therapy can be viewed as too pressurised for some clients such as school children, and that animal assisted therapy presents a more relaxed setting with an animal to focus on and talk through.

Studies suggest that an empathic client-centred therapeutic relationship is most effective in alleviating depressive symptoms and directing the client to a healthier mental state and well-being, as opposed to simple rapport reminiscent in talk therapy sessions (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg & Watson, 1998). Participants' commonly praised the unconditional positive regard that therapy dogs presented towards their clients, enhancing an empathic environment for the clients. Past research again commends therapy dogs for their acceptance towards patients and encouragement they provide to express themselves (Barba, 1995; Beierl, 2008; Katcher & Wilkins, 1993). Analysis from the interviews suggests that animal assisted therapy has the possibility to develop client-centred therapy further, benefiting from the extra dimension of animals acting as a second therapist and clients receiving additional empathy.

Conclusion

The themes identified in this research became reminiscent to the different levels for achieving healthy psychological well-being mentioned in the introduction. The first three overall themes focused on how working with animals enhanced individual aspects of the human psyche and were seen to affect one another. The final theme *Freedom & Flexibility*, stressed the most important strengths that animal assisted therapy presented to the participants and their clients. Participants reported that clients found personal successes through their animal assisted therapy sessions, whether it was simply improving their leadership skills or the greater complexities of understanding their depression.

Reflexive Analysis

In this researcher's opinion animal assisted therapies have shown to be successful alternative therapies, working most effectively with children and adolescents. In a constant changing world filled with societal pressures, children and adolescent development is vulnerable to ill health and well-being. Developmental theories such as Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory; Wellman's (1990) theory of mind and Piagetian theory (1983) offer flexible frameworks for animal interactions/therapies to be embedded in the hope to achieve healthy psychological well-being throughout development (Esposito et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, this research had its limitations. The sample size of participants for the above study was small. This was due to animal assisted therapy in the United Kingdom becoming popular only in the last 10 years, whereas animal assisted therapy in the United States became a fully established therapeutic technique in 1977 (Ernst, 2014). If this research were to be conducted at a much larger and more

global scale, results would produce an overall consensus praising the effectiveness of animal assisted therapy. Another limitation of the study is research bias. This researcher in particular had a personal interest and outlook on working with animals, supporting why the study focused on the positive influences of animal assisted therapy. If this study were to be introduced to other researchers interested in humanistic, holistic, existential and ecological psychotherapy, this would then create greater reflexivity and accountability on the part of the researchers. This in turn would produce a larger range of interpretation in which more readers could engage with the symbolic dialogues (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

Animal assisted therapy has demonstrated a flexibility in structure and interpretation in the above study. This researcher suggests that animal assisted therapies ought to be utilised more and can be embedded into other therapeutic techniques such as cognitive behavioural therapy. Along with the beneficial effects of working and interacting with an animal, the integration of an animal can also build and strengthen the rapport between client and therapist (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Budahn, 2013). Future research could explore the longitudinal effects of animal assisted therapies further than the therapy sessions and explore possible relapse rates. Ultimately, focus on the clients experiences rather than the therapists experience would produce greater validity of detail, with the possible inclusion of interviewing the family members and outside authority figures such as teachers to provide a complete holistic review.

Human animal interventions are successful among children with behavioural, emotional and or psychological problems and are used in settings such as psychiatric units and correctional facilities (Esposito et al, 2011; Melson, 2003). However, the researcher stresses that human animal interactions ought to be established prior to such problems arising, through holistic school and community based programmes in addition to supporting animal assisted therapies as an alternative therapy. That way, we are aiding in reducing the onset of ill mental health (even by a little helps), creating a respect and appreciation for the natural world we live in and even educating the next generation on the importance of the animal world.

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